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ABSTRACT

A study examined the revision strategies of basic writers. Subjects, one female from Guyana, one from Belize, and one African-American student from New York, were identified as "basic writers" based on performance on minimum competency writing tests. Subjects had their think-aloud protocols recorded as they read and revised a text. Transcripts were analyzed for evidence of miscues, were categorized according to the standards students use in evaluating expository text, and were analyzed to determine correlations between the perceptions of how the subjects improved the text and what they actually did as they read the texts. Results indicated that (1) basic writers' miscues are not related to how they read with the intention of improving texts; (2) basic writers can identify and propose solutions to problems at the lexical, syntactical, and semantic levels of discourse; and (3) basic writers' perceptions of their writing processes correlate with what they actually do as they compose and read texts. (Seventeen references and two appendixes of data are attached.) (RS)

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PATHS TO EMPOWERMENT: PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION & RESOLUTION STRATEGIES OF BASIC WRITERS

Brenda M. Greene

As an instructor/researcher in the area of basic writing, I am a facilitator and I am, therefore, responsible for empowering students by providing them with the strategies that will enable them to become more competent writers of texts. One way of determining the strategies that basic writers use, is to identify one aspect of their revision strategies, specifically, to identify the processes that they use as they read texts with the intention of improving them.

Much of the research on basic writers has focused on the texts they produce, the strategies they use to make these texts error free, and program descriptions. Shaughnessy's Errors & Expectations represents the seminal work in this area. She described the writing of basic writers as characterized by writing which reflects the following:

a) limited experience with the punctuation code;

b) difficulties with constructing sentences which relect knowledge of the syntax of standard written English;

c) difficulties with orthography;

d) dependence on a basic core of words;

e) an inability to develop and elaborate an idea;

f) an absence of movement between concrete and abstract statements; and

g) an inability to take into account the needs of the reader.

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David Bartholomae used protocols to analyze the kinds of errors basic writers made and found that these errors represented patterns. Bartholomae recommended a curriculum in which students are given opportunities to determine patterns of errors in the context of their own writing. Once students recognize these patterns, they can develop strategies for correcting their errors.

While Bartholomae examined the errors of basic writers, Sondra Perl studied basic writers from another perspective. She used protocol analysis to describe the composing processes of basic writers; she found that they spent too much time in premature editing and that miscues accounted for their inability to see problems in their texts.

Flower et al.'s research on the problem detection, diagnosis, and revision strategies of novice writers revealed that these writers tend to identify problems at the local level of discourse rather than at the global level of discourse. In other words, they have difficulty defining the rhetorical problems of the text.

The research of Shaughnessy Bartholomae, Perl, and Flower et al. provide a framework for discussing the findings of a study, (my dissertation) which I conducted on three basic writers at Medgar Evers College, a college within the CUNY system. These students were placed in the first level remedial writing course because they had not met the minimum competency in writing required by CUNY. Their placement exams had been graded holistically on a scale of 1 - 6; they scored three and under on the placement exam. Students who score three and under have difficulty with paragraph and essay

organization and have limited control of grammatical structures such as the sentence, the verb and inflectional endings.

I was interested in looking at what processes basic writers use as they move from the composing to the revising process. Specifically, I was interested in what motivated them to revise the first draft of a text. The following questions provided a context for my study of basic writers' strategies as they moved from the composing to the revising process. What did they look for? What were their major concerns? What did they see as problematic? Were they primarily concerned with determining whether they had adequately expressed their intentions? Were they concerned with determining whether the text was cohesive and coherent?

I was also interested in the kinds of solutions basic writers proposed to solve problems in texts? Were they primarily concerned with proposing solutions on the surface as opposed to the meaning level of the text? Were they primarily concerned with proposing solutions on the local (sentence and paragraph level) as opposed to the global (rhetorical level of the text)? Did their solutions create other kinds of problems? Did their solutions reveal problems such as miscues and a tendency to focus on "ill-defined" problems (Flower et al. 25). Did their solutions improve the quality of texts?

Lastly, my own experiences as an instructor of basic writing had revealed that when basic writers read with the intention of improving texts, they read their own texts differently than they read their peers' texts. I was interested in documenting this. Elsa Bartlett's

research on inexperienced writers had revealed that because of too much privileged information, inexperienced writers had difficulty reseeing their texts and they could not create enough distance from their texts; they, therefore, might find it easier to revise their peers' texts. Carol Berkenhotter's and Nina Ziv's research on peer response groups has revealed that students may give constructive peer response when they have adequate opportunities to provide feedback. If this were true, why not give the basic writers in my study an opportunity to provide feedback to their peers. How would the strategies they used to read and attempt to improve their own texts differ from those they used for their peers' texts?

The basic writers in my study were selected on the basis of their willingness to volunteer to attend six sessions outside of classtime. For the purposes of confidentiality, they were called Marie, Carol, and Diana. Marie was from Guyana, Carol was from Belize, and Diana was an African-American student from Brooklyn, New York. Marie and Carol were in their early twenties and Diana was 19 years old.

The participants of the study met with the researcher/instructor for six sessions. Each session was held in a private office. All sessions for the study were taped and data were obtained through think-aloud protocols. In order to limit the degree to which classroom methodology may have affected the findings of this study, I did not use think-aloud protocols as an instructional strategy for the course. The instructional context of the course was one in which students read and responded to essays related to a variety of social issues. Revision was encouraged and students wrote drafts of essays

and revised them after class discussion of a particular topic and/or instructor feedback. Because of this instructional environment, the participants first encountered think-aloud protocols during the practice session.

The first session was a practice session. At this session, the participants were first asked to orally read a text that they wished to improve. This was required in order to obtain a record of their oral reading performance. The next phase involved think-aloud protocols. These protocols consisted of three parts. First, the participants were asked to reread the entire text, identify the problems they saw in the text, and explain how they would solve these problems. Second, they were asked to reread the text, stop whenever they saw a problem and explain how they would solve that problem. Lastly, they were asked to comment on any parts of the text which seemed especially problematic for them. Thus, the participants' problem identification and resolution strategies were obtained from several reading perspectives. The purpose of this practice session was to provide the participants with an opportunity to orally monitor their reading and problem solving strategies. Data from this session were not reported in the findings.

During sessions two through five, the basic writers repeated the tasks they had engaged in during the practice session. In sessions two and three, they responded to texts they had composed for class assignments. These texts related to social issues and they were asked to express their view on these issues. Each writer selected the text she wanted to improve at each session. During sessions four and five,

the basic writers responded to texts composed by their peers who were not in their class; these texts also addressed social issues. All participants read the same peers' texts.

The last session consisted of an open-ended interview where the basic writers described their educational background and discussed their concepts of the writing process. As the instructor/researcher, I asked them to describe a) where they came from, b) the kinds of schools they attended, and c) what they had studied in terms of reading, writing, and/or English. I also asked them to describe their concepts of writing, proofreading, editing, and good and bad essays.

The data were collected and analyzed in three phases. First, transcripts of the participants' oral reading performance were transcribed, coded, and analyzed in order to determine whether there was evidence that they miscued as they read their own and peers' texts. A modified form of Goodman's Reading Miscue Inventory was used to code these miscues. Second, transcripts of participants' problem identification and resolution strategies were transcribed, coded, and analyzed according to a classification scheme developed by Linda Baker. Baker developed a classification system to determine the kinds of standards college students used as they evaluated expository texts. These standards were classified as lexical, syntactical, and semantic. The semantic standards were further subdivided into standards representing propositional and structural cohesiveness, internal and external consistency, and informational clarity and completeness. Lastly, transcripts of participants' interviews were examined to: 1) obtain background information, 2) determine patterns

related to their educational experiences and their perceptions of the writing process, and 3) determine the correlations between their perceptions of how they read with the intention of improving texts and what they actually did as they read these texts.

Findings

The findings from an analysis of participants' oral reading performance revealed that they made a minimal number of miscues, 3% to 10% when they read their own and peers' texts. (See APPENDIX A). There was no major difference between the number and kinds of miscues they made in their own and peers' texts. Most of the miscues were word substituitions, followed by omissions and insertions. A large percentage of the miscues were dialect-related, e.g., inflectional endings on nouns, verb tense shifts. There were only several instances where the participants repeated miscues as they read and identified problems; thus, the degree to which miscues may have interfered with the participants' ability to identify textual problems was very slight.

The findings from an analysis of the participants problem identification and resolution strategies revealed that in both their own and peers' texts, they identified problems on all levels of discourse, that is, they identified problems related to the lexical level of discourse (word choice), the syntactical level of discourse (grammar), and the semantic level of discourse (meaning). In both their own and peers' texts, they identified more problems related to the semantic level of discourse (See APPENDIX B).

The participants were motivated to identify problems in their own

texts because something did not sound right, something appeared to be missing or there were not enough details or examples given. Carol, for example, in discussing an essay on why dieting should be for health reasons, stated: "This paragraph doesn't make sense here. . . . there is no information in here about why you should diet to get slim" (Greene 106). She realized that she had repeated the same sentence in a subsequent paragraph.

Marie, on the other hand, in an essay on what male and female relationships will be like in the future, wanted to revise her first paragraph because:

> "In this first paragraph, it is not developed fully. This paragraph is too short. Paragraphs should have more than three sentence. This only have about one sentence so it's not fully developed" (Greene 101).

Diana, in describing the problems in her second text on why husbands and wives should share equally in household work, stated:

> "I left out alot of words. Another person might not read it the way I read it. They might not know what I was really talking about. I'm telling how I feel. They don't exactly know how I really feel. They don't know how I really feel because it's not expressed good enough" (Greene 127).

In attempting to resolve problems in their texts, the participants had difficulty articulating the problem and their knowledge about rules for grammar and structure did not necessarily help to resolve the problem. When Marie, for instance in the previous example, stated that her paragraph needed more development, she was partly right; in addition to more development, her introductory

paragraph needed a clear focus. The purpose of her text was not clear because Marie had not, as Flower et. al have stated been able to define the rhetorical problem of her text.

In addition to difficulty with articulating textual problems, the participants sometimes made their problems more complicated. An example of how they complicated a problem at the local level of discourse can be observed in Carol's sentence from her essay about why people should diet for health reasons. In commenting on the sentence: "Some children rather eat potato chips instead of their real food", Carol stated:

> "It doesn't sound right when you say some children rather eat potato chips. Isn't eat in the present tense? I would put: `Some children rather eating potato chips or corn chips instead of their real food' (Greene 119).

Carol, thus, knew there was a verb tense problem; however, her recommendation to solve this problem made it more complicated. She did not know enough about the structure of English grammar to select the appropriate verb tense form so that she could solve this problem.

Although the participants did not always resolve the problems within their texts, their comments reflected an awareness that their intentions should be clearly expressed and that there should be a logical relationship between the ideas in their paragraphs and their essay as a whole. In discussing her paragraph on dieting, Carol, for example, indicated that she would omit some paragraphs and restructure others. Marie, for instance, talked about how she repeated herself too much in her essay on parent's responsibility to their children.

These comments related to participants' problems at both the global and local level of the text, reveal that when given the opportunity, basic writers can identify problems at various levels of their texts. Their comments and strategies for solving textual problems are not restricted to what Flower and Hayes have characterized as the features and conventions of the text or what Sommers has characterized as surface errors on the lexical level of the text. Their problem identification and resolution strategies are related to concerns about meaning and structure.

As Marie, Carol, and Diana read their peers' texts with the intention of improving them, they were all concerned with the fact that both texts lacked a clear focus. The first peers' text was an attempt to focus on the concept that traditions, ethics, and values within the American society were declining. The second peers' text was an attempt to focus on why people go into debt. The participants' comments to their peers' texts reflected a desire to reorder and elaborate sentences and paragraphs. As in their own texts, they were more concerned with problems related to the semantic level of the texts than they were with problems related to the syntactical and lexical levels. Their comments reflected a concern with cohesiveness, coherence, and clarity.

Marie, for example, indicated that the writer of the first peers' texts did not develop the idea that tradition, ethics and morals were declining. She stated that: "... the writer should have developed it a little more, gave a little more, explained a little more and given more ideas and examples" (Greene 165). In the writer's sentence:

"In the future only the richest countries will servive," Carol stated that the writer should have explained how: ". . . only the richest countries would survive" (Greene 166) and Diana suggested that the writer should have explained what countries he/she was talking about (166).

In discussing the second peers' text, the participants also expressed a concern with cohesiveness. Marie and Carol both had concerns about the last sentence in the second paragraph of the text. The second paragraph read:

> Many people go into debt because they have over extended their credit. People are no longer able to save up for what they want today. The average person may spent his or her salary on other things, "for example," transportation, food and other home items. These things are very important and spenting cash is most likely to happen. Advertisements are just another way to get people influenced in buying things they can't afford (Greene 276).

Marie suggested that the last sentence could be used to develop another paragraph (Greene 172) and Carol stated that the writer: ". . . should add more details. She should say how advertisements influence people, like the jeans commercial" (172). In commenting on the same paragraph, Diana stated that: "A few different thoughts are in this paragraph" (172).

The participants' concerns with clarity can be observed by noting their comments for the first sentence in the third paragraph. The sentence read: "The most important reason is that people are able to

charge goods and services for their home and car". Marie stated: "This doesn't come across right." She recommended that the sentence be revised to read: "Today people are able to charge goods and service for their homes or car on credit." Carol recommended that the sentence be changed to ". . . the most important reason why people should use credit is because they will be able to charge goods and services for their home or car" (Greene 173). Diana saw this sentence as problematic from another perspective. She indicated: "I don't know if that's the most important reason. If you have a salary, to me the most important reason is to be able to have the money for transportation to get back and forth to work" (Greene 174). Therefore, in addition to the lack of clarity in this sentence, Diana also questionned the validity of the sentence.

As in their comments on problems in their own texts, the participants were also concerned with problems related to syntax and word choice in their peers' texts; however, in both their own and peers' texts, they spent more time commenting on problems related to the semantic level of the texts. The participants' comments about their peers' texts thus reveal that, as in commenting on their own texts, when given the opportunity, basic writers can identify and propose solutions to problems at all levels of discourse.

The open-ended interview revealed that the participants saw reading with the intention to improve texts as looking for evidence of sentence and verb tense problems, determining whether paragraphs were cohesive and adequately developed and determining whether what they had written was clear to them as readers.

In commenting on what she did as she attempted to revise her texts, Carol stated:

> I look for how to develop it, how I start the sentences and paragraphs; I try to add more facts and details, spelling problems, subject verb agreement . . . If the essay sounds good, I don't look for problems. . . . I only look for problems when the essay doesn't sound good (Greene 216).

Diana indicated that before she began this study, she had been used to just giving in her essay. In commenting on how she tried to improve her texts, she stated: "I take out material that is not necessary. I add more details" (Greene 217).

In describing poor writers, Carol saw them as those who wrote about: ". . . facts you can't understand" (Greene 215). Marie saw good writers as those who: ". . . explain to you as they write" (Greene 213). These comments suggest that the basic writers of this study were aware of the importance of the reader in the writing process and were aware that their writing had to be understood and communicated to their readers in clear and understandable ways.

Discussion

This was an exploratory study and its findings must be viewed as tentative for their verifiablility is limited by the nature of the study. However, these findings provide some documentation for examining what basic writers do as they read texts with the intention of improving them. The significant findings are discussed below.

Basic writers' oral reading performance, that is their evidence of miscues, does not seem to be related to how they read with the

intention of improving texts. Since they made a minimal number of miscues in the study (3% to 10%), the degree to which miscues may have interfered with their ability to detect problems in the text was slight. This finding does not support the research of Perl and Warters which suggests that miscues account for the reasons why basic writers engage in premature editing and have difficulty revising their texts.

Basic writers can identify and propose solutions to problems at the lexical, syntactical, and semantic level of discourse. They are motivated to identify problems in their own texts when something does not sound right, something is missing, or when they have not adequately expressed what they want to say. In resolving problems, they may reorder paragraphs, reword sentences, and correct verb tense and spelling problems. However, these solutions do not always solve the problem and may create other problems.

In identifying and proposing solutions to problems in their peers' texts, basic writers are concerned with whether the writer has clearly expressed the focus of the text and developed the text in a logical way. They are also concerned with problems related to sentence structure, verb tense, and spelling. As in the reading of and attempting to identify and propose solutions to problems in their own texts, they are motivated to identify a problem because something does not sound right or they are not clear about the writer's intention. Their proposed solutions to problems do not always solve the problem.

Lastly, when basic writers discuss their perceptions of the

writing process and of how they read texts with the intention of improving them, their perceptions of these processes correlate with what they actually do as they compose and read texts. They may compose and respond to texts although they are not aware as Flower et al. have noted, that they have not adequately expressed their intentions or adequately formed a conceptual understanding of the topics of their texts. Although they are concerned with problems at all levels of discourse: lexical, syntactical, and semantic, they tend to focus on the local level of the text (sentence and paragraph) rather than the global or rhetorical level of the text. This focus shifts when they are reading their peers' texts. They find it easier to identify and recommend solutions to problems in their peers' texts for they do not have to what Bartlett calls, inhibit the privileged information inherent in their own texts. They can create enough distance to observe that the goal, purpose, theme or thesis of the text is not clear.

The implications of these findings for instructors of basic writing suggest that we re-examine what basic writers can and cannot do. We need to give basic writers many opportunities to make the connections between the dichotonomies of knowledge that Bruner outlines in Toward a Theory of Instruction. These dichotonomies may be represented as the difference between "knowing that" and "knowing how." Basic writers have an intuitive awareness of problems in their own and peers' texts, but they have limited strategies for solving these problems. Their solutions to problems are often what Shaughnessy calls ". . . a mismanagement of complexity," (73), or what

Mayher, Lester, & Pradl have called, "knowledge . . . poorly applied" (65). Basic writing instructors, therefore, should provide basic writers with opportunities to use their intuitive awareness about textual problems as a springboard for identifying recurring patterns in their own and peers' writing and increasing their knowledge about the structure of the language. Basic writers can then use this knowledge to bridge the gap between "knowing that" and "knowing how."

Since basic writers do not always adequately explore the intentions of their texts, they need to engage in activities which will encourage them to a) draw upon their own experiences as a framework for discussing their intentions and b) contemplate, rehearse, and explore these ideas in the classroom. They also need opportunities to read about topics and to use talking and writing to broaden and deepen their understanding about them.

In addition to exploring their intentions in their texts, basic writers need to see their texts as meaningful and as worthy of being read. They may come to view their writing as meaningful if they are given opportunities to write to real audiences. Their audiences may be their peers or may be members of their community. They may be legislators, civic leaders, student government leaders and newspaper editors.

George in recommending the use of peer response groups noted that writing instructors are experienced readers of student texts. We do not give basic writers this experience. Basic writers need to become experienced readers of texts. They need opportunities to read their own and peer texts, to read and respond to drafts of texts, to read

as Frank Smith notes, like a writer and to find what Tierney and LaZansky call the void created when the contractual agreement betweeen readers and writers is violated. Giving basic writers practice in reading student texts may help them to create the distance that Bartlett suggests is needed to perceive problems in their own texts.

Finally, as basic writing instructors, we have a responsibility to empower our students with the knowledge and strategies that will enable them to become competent writers of standard written English. We can accomplish this by starting with the student. We can ask what competencies does this writer bring to the writing process and how can these competencies be drawn upon? We cannot make assumptions about our basic writers. We cannot assume that because we have taught something, it has been learned or because it is common knowledge for us, a particular topic is common knowledge for our students. We cannot assume that our students have made all the connections between what they know and what they encounter in the classroom.

We must proceed sensitively and continually provide our student writers with opportunities to apply what they know and what we have taught them in the context of real writing situations. In this way we are helping to empower our students with the knowledge and strategies that will enable them to grow as writers and to ultimately become responsible for their own writing.

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Number of Miscues: Own Texts

Participant		Marie	Carol	Diana	Total
Text 1	Number of Miscues	22	9	19	50
	Number of Words in Text	226	239	227	694
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	10	4	8	7
Text 2	Number of Miscues	20	20	6	46
	Number of Words in Text	259	378	184	809
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	8	5	3	6
Totals for Texts 1 and 2	Number of Miscues	42	29	25	96
	Number of Words in Text	485	617	411	1503
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	9	5	6	6

Number of Miscues: Peers' Texts

Participant		Marie	Carol	Diana	Total
Text 1	Number of Miscues	26	15	21	62
	Number of Words in Text	454	454	454	454
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	6	3	5	5
Text 2	Number of Miscues	30	13	13	56
	Number of Words in Text	325	325	325	975
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	9	4	4	6
Totals for Texts 1 and 2	Number of Miscues	56	28	34	118
	Number of Words in Text	779	779	779	2337
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	7	4	4	5

Comparison of Problem Identification and Resolution Strategies: Own and Peers' Texts Summary

Participant	Types of Strategies	Own Texts		Peers' Texts		Total	
		Num	%	Num	%	Num	%
Marie	Lexical	5	5	2	1	7	3
	Syntactical	37	38	37	23	74	29
	Semantic:						
	Propositional Cohesiveness	6	6	3	2	9	3
	Structural Cohesiveness	6	6	43	27	49	19
	External Consistency	0	0	1	1	1	0
	Internal Consistency	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Informational Clarity and Completeness	36	36	63	39	99	38
	Other	9	9	11	7	20	8
	Total	99	100	160	100	259	100

APPENDIX B

Comparison of Problem Identification and Resolution Strategies: Own and Peers' Texts Summary

Participant	Types of Strategies	Own Texts		Peers' Texts		Total	
		Num	%	Num	%	Num	%
Carol	Lexical	4	5	7	5	11	5
	Syntactical	27	34	34	26	61	29
	Semantic:						
	Propositional Cohesiveness	8	10	10	8	18	9
	Structural Cohesiveness	13	16	24	19	37	18
	External Consistency	1	1	8	6	9	4
	Internal Consistency	1	1	0	0	1	0
	Informational Clarity and Completeness	20	25	38	30	58	28
	Other	6	8	8	6	14	7
	Total	80	100	129	100	209	100

Comparison of Problem Identification and Resolution Strategies: Own and Peers' Texts Summary

Participant	Types of Strategies	Own Texts		Peers' Texts		Total	
		Num	%	Num	%	Num	%
Diana	Lexical	8	9	2	1	10	5
	Syntactical	23	28	43	32	66	30
	Semantic:						
	Propositional Cohesiveness	15	18	29	22	44	20
	Structural Cohesiveness	3	4	17	13	20	9
	External Consistency	4	5	4	3	8	4
	Internal Consistency	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Informational Clarity and Completeness	15	18	29	22	44	20
	Other	15	18	10	7	25	12
	Total	83	100	134	100	217	100